

[Under the Kanopy: Two with Michel Piccoli](#)



By Craig J. Clark

[You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet \(Alain Resnais, 2012\)](#)

On May 12, the great and greatly prolific French actor Michel Piccoli died at the age of 94. With hundreds of screen credits to his name, from 1945 to 2015, Piccoli was a fixture of French cinema who worked with nearly every major director in the French film industry, often multiple times. He didn't cross paths with New Wave fixture Alain Resnais until both were in the twilight of their careers, though, when Resnais cast Piccoli as himself in his penultimate feature. Based on two plays by French playwright Jean Anouilh, *You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet* starts with a baker's dozen actors being summoned to the home of a deceased playwright whose version of *Eurydice* they've all performed in at one time or another. To their surprise, they've been assembled to view a recording of a new avant-garde production of the play, but instead of idly watching, the actors – starting with Piccoli, who played Orpheus's father – begin reciting their dialogue and interacting with the performers onscreen. And Resnais doesn't stop there, employing digital effects to make people appear and disappear and split screens when multiple actor pairs are playing the same scene simultaneously. It's all part of the gamesmanship that has been part of the director's modus operandi going back to 1961's [Last Year at Marienbad](#) (which doesn't feature Piccoli, but is still worth checking out and puzzling over).

[Death in the Garden \(Luis Buñuel, 1956\)](#)

One of Michael Piccoli's most fruitful collaborations was with Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel, with whom he made six films in all. The first was *Death in the Garden*, a French/Mexican co-production for which Buñuel toned down his surrealistic tendencies to tell a story set in an unnamed South American state where a government takeover of the diamond mines gets the prospectors who have staked their claims all riled up. That leads to complications for a number of people just passing through, including Piccoli's Father Lizardi, a Catholic missionary who's eager to take up his post with an Indian tribe deep in the jungle. When the miners' rebellion tips over into violence, Father Lizardi joins four other French nationals – a prostitute played by top-billed Simone Signoret, a grizzled prospector played by Charles Vanel and his deaf-mute daughter, and a rugged loner played by Georges Marchal – on the next boat heading out of town. Unfortunately for all of them, when they're forced to cut through the jungle they're deprived of their provisions and they really aren't up to the task of surviving without them. To say Father Lizardi's faith gets tested along with everyone else's would be an understatement.

After *Death in the Garden*, Piccoli reunited with Buñuel for 1964's *Diary of a Chambermaid* and could be counted on to pop up in roles both large and small in *Belle de Jour*, [The Milky Way](#) (in which Piccoli plays the Marquis de Sade), *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, and *The Phantom of Liberty*. He even dubbed the voice of Spanish actor Fernando Rey in Buñuel's final film, *That Obscure Object of Desire*, in which the female lead is played in alternating scenes by two different actresses. Sounds like something Alain Resnais would cook up.

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